

[Franco-American Grandmother]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

Pub. Living Lore in New England (New Hampshire)

TITLE Franco-American Grandmother

WRITER Victoria Langlois

DATE WDS. PP. 11

CHECKER DATE

SOURCES GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

[(?) ?]

PORTRAIT OF A FRANCO-AMERICAN GRANDMOTHER

N.H. Federal Writers' Project #1801

Mr. Manuel Subject: Living Lore in New England

PORTRAIT OF A FRANCO-AMERICAN GRANDMOTHER

by

Victoria Langlois

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I do not know Mrs. L. very well, but I have often come in contact with one of her granddaughters, who is married to my schoolmate's nephew. When this young woman talked about her grandmother, she seemed extremely proud of her. I could feel that there was a person who had deeply imprinted her ways of understanding life in the minds of those with whom she had lived.

I was curious about her. As I knew that she had come here when she was very young and that she is now seventy years old[,?] I [thought?] that she would have something interesting to say about her first years in this country.

I went to see her. When I arrived at her house, she was all alone; she took me into her bedroom, where, she said, she liked to sit in the afternoon watching the sun go down.

On the small table in front of the window there are several things: a large piece of pink knitting, an old 2 prayerbook, a rosary of blue beads on a gold chain, and a big black book.

Mrs. L- is tall and thin, and she holds herself quite straight; her face is pale and three or four deep pock marks are visible on the dry skin of her cheeks. Behind her glasses, her dark eyes are bright and alert, as if they had kept some part of the great vitality she must have possessed in her youth.

Her lips are thin and perhaps a little distended by the artificial teeth, which seem to get on her nerves at times; but, all in all, a face that you like to watch as she listens to you, and then talks slowly, quietly, giving you the impression that she looks in a mirror which reproduces images invisible to you....

"I have lived here a little more than fifty years," she says, answering my question. "Fifty years, it is a long time, and yet, I remember what happened then as if it was yesterday."

"I would like you to tell me about it. Mrs. L-".

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"Well, a few days before we began the trip to the States, I went to the village with my father. He had to see about the tickets, the transportation of the few things we were going to take with us, the purchase of new clothes for [us?] children, the payment of bills etc..

"We went to the general store, where we could find everything we needed. I'll never forget this hour.

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When my father told Mr. B- the merchant, that he had decided to leave his farm and go to the United States to make money, by working in the cotton mills with his two oldest daughters, and also the other children, as soon as they would be old enough , Mr. B- seemed greatly distressed.

["?"] " ' Oh! no, no, don't do that, Joe. " "" he said. "

["?"] " ' But, Mr. B- I am a poor man ; I have not enough land to make a success of agriculture; I can't buy enough cows; in fact, I cannot " venir a bout de mes affaires " (make both ends meet) if I stay here. My brother, who has gone to the States writes us that he is making money, he has four children working in the mills' " ...

'Yes, yes, working in the mills, sapriste!' interrupted Mr. B-, "But, my good Joseph, think of what you will give, not only of what you will receive! You are going to make your children into slaves, spending their days behind thick, dirty walls, bound to some looms in the terrific and incessant noise. 2From six o' clock in the morning until six o' clock at night, they will be driven by some blind power, and then, they will fall into their beds, in some crowded rooms, in order to gather enough strength to begin over again, the next day'....

" [' ?] I know! I have seen these mills, when I went for a business trip to Boston last year. I thought they were something inhuman, almost infernal...You and yours 4 do not belong there, Joe. We are a rural race; our land is extra ordinarily fertile and should be made to produce enough for all; if the Americans want to enlarge their manufacturing industry, very

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well, but our people should not be ensnared by them. " " ' Nothing hurts me more, nothing makes me sadder or more utterly discouraged for our future, than to see a Canadian-a man whose ancestors have opened this soil, have tilled it, have lived on it and now sleep under it- admit that he is willing to see his children spend their lives for the profit of these capitalists who draw hard gold from sweat and blood. " " " " ' You tell me that you are poor, Joe. No, you are not poor. A man is not poor who has all the substantial food he can eat, and all the wood he can burn. That is not poverty. When you open the door of your little house every morning you put your foot onto your own land. Ever think of that, Joe? " " " ' Oh! you work hard, I know; your wife works hard too; but do you imagine that you won't work just as hard down there? Here you have space, air, and all the essentials of life, a little more perhaps. Your children are not dressed like city folks, but they are kept warm in winter; they can laugh at our famous North wind when they are wrapped up to their necks in "bonne etoffe du pays" (cloth woven at home with pure wool sheared from the owner's sheep), and above 5 all, they grow up with the sense of a simple but very real dignity. They come from honest, decent stock and every body knows it around here. The little luxuries that they might get out of their earnings will take away from them this so important felling. They will be driven like cattle; they will be "foreigners", they will be "immigrants." As a rule, an immigrant is a poor devil who leaves his country because he is sure to suffer from hunger and cold if he stays "... " " All the time he was speaking, Mr. B- was standing in front of my father, who was listening at the low but firm voice, absolutely unable to give an answer to this vehement surge of words.

["?"] ' You Canadian farmers, are not proud enough of your profession. This goodly pride should be taught in school["?"] ' mused Mr. B- after a moment of silence.

He signed deeply, then made a step forward and offered his hand to my father.

["Well?], goodbye and good luck to you, Joe... and to you, Miss Marie-Anne,' said he, with a smile in his fine, dark brown eyes. 'Come back soon and marry an habitant '.

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"Really, this scene has stayed in my mind as one of the most vital of all my life. Who knows? Perhaps it is from that moment that the idea germinated in me that it is of the greatest importance for a human being to adapt himself so as to be an integral part of the country where he lives his days " " Well, " continued Mrs. L-after a moment of silence during which she had looked at the sunset, "we came here and we worked in the mills. I began at eighteen, my sister at sixteen, then my two brothers, when they were fifteen and thirteen, and last; my younger sister at fifteen. It was then the usual rule and nobody said anything against it. I realize now that it was not right, for while my sister and I were tall, had good strong bones, the three younger ones developed into puny-looking sickly adults. They are all dead now. I, the oldest, will be the last one to go.

"Every summer when the mills were so hot that it was almost impossible to breath breathe inside them (many girls fainted every day), our parents sent my sisters and me for a visit with our uncles and aunts in Canada. I was interested in everything on the farm: chickens, ducks, calves, cute little pigs were a source of deep enjoyment for me. Oh! the thick, yellow cream, the small, sweet strawberries of the fields, the raspberries, blueberries we had there!

"I used to tease and bother my aunts to teach me how to " travailler au metier " (carpet weaving on a handloom). I brought down a spinning wheel from the attic and learned how to spin. I knitted stockings, and I wove flannel and linen; of course; lace-making with a 7 crochet or needles, didn't keep any secret for me. " I am talking about 45 years ago. At that time there were no moving pictures; no theatres, except once in a while, in fact, amusements were great events. Every year, there was a bazaar in the parish; that was our social event in the whole twelve months! That was all the out-of-the-house diversion we had! Even the courting was done in the home under the jealous eye of the girl's mother.

"When I was twenty-two, I was married. I had not much liked to work in the mill, but I had not let myself dislike it either. Girls were meek and submissive then; they did not have

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much to say about the arrangement of their lives. I was glad to start doing the real and only-so I have always believed - job for a woman; to be wife and mother."

"Had you learned to speak English during these years, Mrs. L-? " I inquired.

"I had learned very little English. But I had always liked books, and had been quite ["?"] appliquee ["?"] in my school-work at the convent, in Canada. My young cousin was going to school here and, curiosity guiding me, I think, I learned to read in English from her. But I never could find time or I was too tired to read anything; in one word, I lived the life of a "legume " (vegetable) for almost five years.

"The first year of my married life was like a beautiful and serene recess after a hard day's work. I learned to cook and to "sew" a fine seam. I knitted and crocheted to my hearts content. As I was not as well as I should have been, my good husband made what he called a "big sacrifice" and sent me to Canada for a rest...but I did not rest very much, for during that month, I weaved wove? some fifty yards of colorful "catalogne " which was cut to fit the length of the room, then sewed together (just like the old-fashioned carpeting); it covered entirely and very nicely the floor of what we were pleased to call "le salon " (parlor) [:?] I was proud of myself!"

"When I came back [x-?] Manchester I suppose that I had been lonesome there or that I had hated to admit my ignorance when one of my relatives would ask curiously: 'How do you say this and that in English?' I decided to learn to speak English. I began to read the local English newspaper, then some reviews and magazines. One Saturday evening, I remember it was a soft-spring night, I ventured to go to the Public Library. You may believe it was quite difficult at first; I had to resort often to the French-English dictionary. After a while, it became clearer, easier; and what a great feeling it was to understand what people were saying, in the streets, in the stores, everywhere!"

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"Then my first child was born. I awoke to many new and unknown feelings, and I felt myself literally 'taking root' here, if I may say so.

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"Some time before, I had read in the dictionary this definition: ' Langue maternelle, langue du pays ou l'on est ne ' (Maternal language, tongue of the country where one is born..) I resolved that my children would know primarily the language of this country-their own. These children born and brought up in an English-speaking country must speak English correctly and without any accent; they must be permitted and not reprimanded for speaking English at home, not only with their playmates; they must be given good English books to read, so that their vocabulary will be constantly enlarged, so that they can penetrate the soul and know the works of the greatest Americans, who have made this country the greatest of all the world.

"From now on, I looked forward; I was always proud of my French ancestry, but I 'acclimated myself..artificially'. I did not wish them to live in the past; you cannot go very far nor advance very fast if you look behind you.

"Your parents never regretted Canada, Mrs. L-?

"I don't know...there are things that you never know; my father never said that he was sorry. He had a few thousand dollars when he died. He probably would have had as much-not in money, but in property if he had worked as constantly and as hard on his farm in Canada. And the feeling of loneliness, of being a stranger, of being nothing but an obscure cog in a gigantic machine, must have put a bitter taste in his mouth.

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"You know how Canadians love politics; some say they play politics " du jour de l' an a la St Sylvestre ' (from the first of January to the 31st of December) well, he was never naturalized. My husband was one of the first to obtain the right to vote.

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"I think my mother was awfully lonely here. She never complained but...she lived her life watching for the postman.

"....I think sometimes that I would have had quite a different life, not better, not happier, but quite different, if I had married a Canadian ["?"] habitant ["?"] (farmer). But there must be a meaning to it; there is a meaning to every thing that happens in life; only we don't always understand it..."

Mrs. L- did not say any more; she looked tired and though she had been speaking in a low, calm voice, she was a little out of breath.

She touched the things on the table, put the black book, farther away, drew the rosary nearer.

She smiled at me and said:

"Now, I know I have been talking too much. You'll have to excuse me; You see[, ?] old folks have a way of thinking aloud; you come to see me and I give you a page of my history. "

"That was very interesting Mrs. L. and I cannot thank you enough"....

She laughed.

"I should be the one to say "Thank you, I think.

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We who are almost out of the picture are some times pleased to realize that we are still in the background...."

"Please come again; I'll be glad to answer you questions if you think that what I have seen may be of any use to you..."

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To be continued.